

HISTORY OF N.Y. CIVIL SERVICE SYSTEM

A colorful chapter in the history of our State is depicted in the Civil Service Mural, located in the reception area at the Alfred E. Smith State Office Building. The story told by the mural is of bitter conflict, overriding personal ambitions, broken political careers, and a vigorous, resolute crusade of courage. Of the principal characters that appear in the mural, four were Presidents of the United States and six served as Governors of New York.

The crusaders were victorious. The result of their struggle--a government service composed of well-qualified people chosen for their fitness for the job--is illustrated by the group of figures at the right. Standing close by the desk of President Grover Cleveland is an early candidate in high buttoned shoes who personifies the hundreds of thousands of men and women who have competed over the years for positions in the public service.

Behind the figures flows the beautiful and majestic Hudson River. In the words of the artist, the great river is "the backbone of the mural." Its role in the picture matches its importance in our history.

Vignettes of the past appear at the upper left. There, like a phantom ship, is Henry Hudson's Half Moon. And there are the steamboat Clermont, a sailing sloop of the same era, and a canal barge. Overland transportation is represented by the primitive steam engine and by the covered wagon which took many adventurous New Yorkers westward. A Continental soldier can be found among the figures composing this backdrop, and the fabled Leatherstocking too.

The Spoils System

After the Revolution, New York became a state and George Clinton was elected its first Governor in 1777. Officials and employees had to be appointed to carry on the functions of the new government, and people who had done favors for the party in power were given the jobs. The point was to reward the faithful; nobody paid much attention to whether appointees were qualified. This was the patronage or "spoils" system, and that's the way it went for more than a hundred years.

DeWitt Clinton, nephew of George Clinton, was the patronage dispenser for his uncle. Later he became Governor himself. Students of history recall that he was the moving spirit behind the Erie Canal.

Martin VanBuren, sometimes called "The Red Fox," was a founder of the first political machine: The Albany Regency. VanBuren was a U.S. Senator, Governor of New York, and President of the United States. The Albany Regency dispensed patronage for both Federal and State positions in New York State.

We come next to Thurlow Weed, political leader, patronage dispenser and publisher. Beside him are two U.S. Senators from New York; Thomas C. Platt, last of the great political "bosses" of the State; and Roscoe Conkling, unyielding foe of civil service reform.

The people in general, absorbed in the burgeoning industrial and agricultural life of their young country, seemed for a long time not to pay much attention. But, eventually, angry rumblings came from the citizenry as incompetence in government became rampant. A reform movement gathered strength and came to a dramatic climax with the sad and violent death of President James A. Garfield. His assassin was Charles Guiteau, a disappointed job seeker. This tragedy aroused public demand for an end to the spoils system.

The Merit System

Gathered around Governor Grover Cleveland as he signs the civil service bill into law are some of the men who believed in the merit system and worked hard to establish it. Under this system, getting a job depends on the ability and fitness of the candidate rather than his party affiliation.

Dorman B. Eaton and George William Curtis were founders of the Civil Service Reform Association in 1877--the first such group to be organized. Eaton's efforts helped break up the notorious Tweed Ring in New York City. Curtis was President of the National Civil Service League.

Although the first bill for reform of the federal civil service had been introduced in 1865, it was 17 years before a law actually was passed. The Congress moved swiftly after President Garfield's death, and passed the Pendleton Bill in the closing days of 1882. It became law on January 16, 1883.

New York, whose early government had displayed most glaringly the evils of the spoils system, was first of the states to take positive action to correct them. This was close on the heels of federal reform.

Everett P. Wheeler, who had aided in drafting the National Civil Service Act, also drafted New York's bill. He was Chairman of the Reform Association's Executive Committee. Theodore Roosevelt, then in the State Assembly, piloted the legislation

through the lower house and on May 4 it was approved by the Senate. Governor Cleveland signed it into law the same day. The first State Civil Service Commission was appointed and held its first meeting before the month was out. Soon afterward, the City of Brooklyn and then New York City became the first local units of government to adopt the merit system.

There was continuing opposition from the other camp. The late years of the 19th century were far from easy, and in 1897 a law was passed that took away in part from the Civil Service Commission its authority to hold examinations. The two men responsible for reversing this backward step were Theodore Roosevelt, who became Governor in 1899, and Horace White, then in the Senate. White later became Governor. They were successful in squelching, by a new law, efforts to revive the spoils system.

In the foreground are statesmen Elihu Root and Joseph Choate. Through their efforts, the merit principle was embodied in the State Constitution in 1894.

Holding examinations and seeing that appointments are made according to the law were two of the first functions of the State Civil Service Commission. Many years later, during Al Smith's time, the Department of Civil Service was established. Both the Commission and the Department have acquired many other functions, all of them related to finding, developing and retaining the people best qualified to do the work of New York State's government.